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ABSTRACT

Theatre historians show little inclination to reflect on the ideologies that govern their work, on the premise that "theatre is theatre" with little relationship to its socioeconomic environment. One of the causes is the historians' reliance on theatrical "facts," as they were in the same category as facts established in the natural sciences. Thus, the theatre historians tend to create knowledge that appeals to an aesthetically oriented mind, creating "facts" that reflect the ideological premises of the researcher. A dialectical approach to theatre history would make the researcher aware of the relationships between his arguments and his socio-historically conditioned attitudes. Traditional studies of theatre history must give way to a "dialectic symbiosis" between historically oriented sociological research and behaviorally oriented empirical research in theatre as communication. (RN)

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ON SHAKY GROUND: THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THEATRE HISTORIANS

Konrad Zobel and Juergen Hofmann

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I.

It is a regrettable fact that theatre historians have shown little inclination to theorize on their methodologies and, indeed, to reflect on the ideologies that animate their work. Their theoretical basis rarely goes beyond the tautology that "theatre is theatre." The general acknowledgement of the relationship between theatre and society has remained mere lip service at the altar of relevance instead of becoming the basis of the entire research effort. It is common practice to relegate the socio-economic determinants of cultural phenomena to introductory chapters and summaries, as a "framework" or background, while the subject "proper" asserts an undue autonomy in the main discussion.

In the following analysis some arguments shall be given that should clarify where the prevailing way of studying theatre history falls short of grasping the essential aspects of its subject.

II.

Of first concern, obviously, should be a proper understanding of the development of our subject, namely art and, more especially, theatre. Most of the concepts that guide our investigations in this regard can be traced to the division of labor in the academic realm as it developed from the 16th to the 19th century. This particular specialization, in its turn, originated in that fundamental change related to the rise of the empirical sciences, especially the new physics. In his essay Analytische Wissenschaftslehre und Dialektik [1] Juergen Habermas points out that the realms of theory and work previously had remained largely independent from one another.

The search for understanding (that is, knowledge) had been monopolized by the leisure classes as a luxury. Only with bourgeois society, which legitimized the acquisition of property by work, did research and understanding begin to develop predominantly under the influence of the work-process. In the new factories the traditional artisan work structure was split up and rationally divided into elementary activities. Correspondingly, nature was investigated in the same mechanistic and compartmentalized way.

This specific form of understanding, which regards nature under the aspect of technical disposal, has asserted ever more universal importance as is shown by today's predominance of the empirical sciences. (Despite their having abandoned the old materialistic-mechanistic notions, they still are dominated by practical interests, i.e. they succumb--perhaps intrinsically --to the social pressure of practical application.)

Corresponding to the great effect of the sciences on the practical aspects of life, one can easily discern in the realm of the arts a conscious development away from the utilitarian aspect, a development that reached its first climax with Kant's definition of beauty. The utilitarian logic is being confronted with an irrational stance, the key to which is not practical analysis but taste and sensibility. "Profane" logic is confronted with "transcendental" imagination. The utilitarian interests connected with the realm of material reproduction (i.e. work), thus far regarded as "natural" and accordingly ignored, now become--in their industrialized version--the anathema for the artist who turns into the deliberate champion of individualism, creativity, and wholeness. However, the artist can no longer feel at home in this utilitarian universe.

This transitional period is full of grandiose gestures intended to set fire to the "cold" logic of the new scientific universe. Science had taught that the world could be read like an open book once the language of nature was deciphered. So, one powerful attempt to establish an aesthetic equivalent to the scientific explanation of the universe sought recourse in the rule of allegory. Allegory, being at the same time totally anthropocentric and dehumanized, became indeed a pervasive inventory of nature that littered ~~the~~ an emblematic earth with dead conglomerates where the severed limbs and headless beings testified to the shock caused by the scientific explosion.

A related coup d'universe in an effort to reassert the dominance of a less rational interpretation revived the classic metaphor of the world as theatre.[2] In a sense the parareligious concept of the theatrum mundi, with its rigid but functional distribution of roles, was the aesthetic echo of the traumatic experience of the growing industrialization with its increasing division and rationalization of labor. In innumerable artistic manifestations this metaphor became the watchword for the entire period, obviously serving as the ideological justification for the maintenance of the traditional powerstructure that felt threatened by the new developments.

As we well know, the fine arts, before mere handicrafts, first gained respectability with their emulation of the sciences. Soon, however, the new artists felt they, too, had to retreat from the world that had created them in the first place. Arnold Hauser's characterization of the humanist: that he began to vascillate between a bohemian attitude and an attitude that was apologetic of the ruling classes,[3] eventually became a character portrait

of the artist as such. As the artist became aware of his boundaries and fled into an aesthetic universe, so did the theatre retreat behind the proscenium arch, only to assert itself more fully in this aestheticized world. Confined by the picture frame the theatre evolved into the ritual where the world could still be seen as an anthropocentric universe in which man could see the powers determining him.

Today we witness the separation between technical and humanistic understanding in its extreme disjunction. This separation manifests itself in the antithetical position of and ensuing alienation between our present idealistic notion of the arts (including theatre) and the utilitarian world that has been turned over to the sciences.

III.

Not only our notion of the arts can be traced to these historical changes; so can the notion of objectivity as it has misguided various schools of historians. It will be necessary to analyze this notion as it pertains to history in general. The distinction between theatre history and other branches of history is of an entirely practical, one could also say tactical, nature and has no basis in theory. The relative novelty of theatre history does not exempt it from the problems that general history had and still has to face. The education and, consequently, the knowledge of most theatre historians in this respect is pitiful, to say the least.

Most historians (including theatre historians) are still pursuing the way as it was dogmatically paved in the 19th century. By asserting

that there is such a thing as an historical "fact" they resort to merely describing these "facts", or--as the case might be--to finding the laws that shaped them. In either case objectivity would only be endangered by careless scholarship or partisan bias of the researcher. In short, these historians still try to emulate the way the 19th century natural scientist conceived of his facts, employing concepts that have rapidly been abandoned in this century.

Again, a brief reference to the historical development as indicated above should provide a useful perspective. The utilitarian interest in knowledge that initiated the empirical sciences soon became invisible behind the formalization that made up the new method. Habermas points out that as a consequence scientific work, concerned as it is only with functional relationships of variables, seemed to achieve a total autonomy from the partisan interests of a particular society.[4] Having forgotten the societal motivations for this particular form of understanding, the scientist now asserts that--if not the direction--so certainly the result of his research is independent from society altogether.

Similarly, the historian, after finally forsaking--at least overtly--the role of the apologetic of the prevailing powers, maintains that he has to detach himself from all practical interests (personal and societal) in order to be able to describe objectively what happened and the historical logic behind it all. The criticism of this view has to start with what these historians mean by "objectivity": a reliance on facts.

But what are these facts? Four our historians a "fact" is what in their conception of history can positively be recognized, referring quite

often to ideas that realized themselves in the cultural sphere. They try to reconcile, transcend, or even dismiss the contradictions that are embodied in historical events, turning them into "objects" that can be investigated like a piece of rock. They are unaware that these objects are nothing but theoretical constructions useful for a particular interpretation, as they are unaware that these objects are subject to a constant change that is related to the historians' own historical situation. Only in relation to this change can an interpretation make sense. While even the natural scientists have come to regard their facts (as propounded in natural laws) as relative and subject to change, the "facts" of the historian are best understood as mere metaphors. Historical, i.e. socio-historical "facts" and "objects" therefore belong to a different category than the facts and objects related to natural laws.

As has been intimated, the beginning of historical investigation in its conventional meaning corresponded to that general awakening of the sciences in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the positive effect that the historian emancipated himself from the medieval dependence on tradition. Accordingly, he substituted epic or dramatic description with systematic analysis (for instance, Macchiavelli). In abandoning the transcendant unity of subject and object (as merging in God) and the unity of past, present, and future (as coinciding in transcendant eternity), the historian eventually achieved a secular, a pedestrian distance toward his environment. This made possible an interest in history for history's sake, a development which was accentuated by the rise of the museum and reached its first climax with Ranke in the 19th century.

In trying to seperate his standards and values from facts, the positivistic or neutralist historian emulates the detached procedure of the scientist. However, by denying the subjective interest and attitude of the researcher to interfere, his findings achieve a pseudo-neutrality that makes it possible to employ them for any purpose. That also means that the socio-political establishment can use them for its own perpetuation, and it rarely fails to do so. Neutrality in the above sense assists the status quo. Neutralist history, for which the past serves merely as object, abstains from the most critical issue: the present and the future.

The formation of the capitalist system can be regarded to be at the source of all the intellectual changes of which a brief account has been given. Indeed, in trying to seperate values from facts the neutralist historian imitates the ideology of the capitalist system, in which values are totally dependent on the market. There the created object (product), stripped of the human element that was invested in its making, becomes a neutral object with varying values assigned to it, according to outside circumstances. The human element embodied in the product becomes just another thing, dead neutral. Similarly, the positivistic historian transforms history, which is human, into a product whose values are not alive in it, i.e. are not intrinsic to it, but assigned, according to societal or personal demand, i.e. outside forces. Traditionally, he overcompensates his inhuman procedure by an anecdotal reintroduction of the human element in the form of biographical trivia and the like.

The usual argument against the positivistic historian is that a mere presentation of facts does not yet guarantee objectivity. This argument,

unfortunately, tends to share with the notions of the positivistic historians the same mistaken premise that it is possible to seperate facts from interpretation, i.e. standards. With the realization of the historian that he cannot transcend the dialectic relationship between facts and standards he arrives at the crucial question: "what is my position in," and "what is my opinion about society", and "how does this affect my understanding of history?"

Objectivity in history conventionally means that we should not project today's awareness onto the past. It has been shown that this view implies a misunderstanding of the relationship between the historian and the past. However, one does not necessarily approach history from the viewpoint of the powerful and privileged because one belongs to them or wants to belong to them, just as one does not necessarily approach history from the viewpoint of the oppressed and disenfranchized, because one cannot tolerate social injustice.

Karl Popper--in ~~my~~ our opinion, correctly--refuses to make objectivity a problem of the historian's psychology, as every historical finding necessarily includes an ideological element. But Popper sees this as an argument for total relativity insofar as he sees just one resort for the historian to render innocuous his inevitable prejudices: The historian would have to state his point of view (so to say his angle) clearly and expose it to a diverse forum of peers.[5] A welcome side-effect of this approach would be the democratization of our educational institutions; but this is not to suggest that such a change would take care of all our problems.

The historian cannot abdicate his responsibility to avoid a petty partisan stand (although he necessarily will arrive at partisan findings).

But while he cannot detach himself entirely from his conditioned self, he can reflect on these conditions, and by realizing how history reaches up to him he can understand the past, relate to it. We meet history in our standards. The insights of an historian are revealing only to the extent that we are aware of the relationsship between his arguments and his socio-historically conditioned attitudes. That there is a dialectical relationship between facts and standards means that one does not exist without the other. They mutually condition each other.

However, the circumstance that the categories of the historian are dependent on his socio-historically conditioned consciousness does not mean that objectivity is impossible. The recognition that "facts" are structured through their relationship with the social and historical totality, including the historian's world and attitudes, provides the criterion that judges a study by the success of exhibiting this relationship in a convincing (albeit not testable) manner. This view therefore refutes an historical relativism, while at the same time maintaining that truth can only be developed dialectically by showing the dependencies of concreta from the totality of awareness. To highlight this argument it will be illustrated in the form of a parable, despite the obvious drawbacks of such a procedure:

> A positivistic, an idealistic,[6] and a dialectic historian find themselves shipwrecked in the middle of the Sea of History. The positivistic historian tries to drain it by drinking as much of it as he can until he drowns under his own encyclopedic weight. The idealistic historian lets himself sink to the sea floor to scrape off the "essence" and to avoid the fickle temporal waves at the surface; his findings, lighter than water, bubble to the surface where they pop. The dialectic historian surveys the currents and decides to swim.

IV.

It remains to identify some of the hang-ups that seem to be characteristic of most art- and theatre historians. It is fair to say that most of them feel guided by an aesthetic interest for understanding rather than, for instance, by the behavioral interest of most social scientists. These theatre historians, accordingly, will create knowledge that appeals especially to an aesthetically oriented mind. Unwittingly, they declare theatre to be a value in itself.

Do we go too far then with the assumption that this aesthetic motivation accounts for that seemingly innocent and little noticed restriction of attention, one that prompts so many theatre historians to report history as if they had a vested interest in "theatre", no matter what place it occupies in society? How else could we explain, for instance, their blatantly partisan reproaching of the early (and later) church fathers for their antitheatrical stand; their applauding the return of the monarchy in 1660 after the "dark" period of the Commonwealth; or their pitying Queen Victoria for the distress and anxiety that the 1848 revolution caused her while she was so noble in extending patronage to the national drama; etc.?

The basic problem seems to lie in the fact that most theatre historians assign an absolute value to theatre, regardless of socio-historical considerations. They seem to have in their minds a little black box labeled "theatre", into which they file everything that seems to belong into it. However, theatrical as well as other social phenomena are subject to the dynamics of societies and the consciousness that goes along with them. This means that, for instance, to understand the Broadway theatre and the Teatro Campesino one

has to understand the characteristics of industrial and late-capitalist society. Demonstrating how both relate to this encompassing third says more about these two phenomena of theatrical expression than a comparison of the two in terms of "theatre" as a common denominator.

Most theatre historians are so busy describing the idiosyncrasies of theatrical manifestations of other times and cultures that they fail to see the links that tie their phenomena to the socio-historical reality as a whole. But then, of course, they would have to give up their neatly labeled inventory of theatre. Indeed, their historical relativism stands in direct correspondence to their thinking in chapters, wrapping periods and cultures into neat little packages that can be sold as wares, forming yet another commodity for the consumer.

To use theatre as a conceptual category that guides our selection of historical material is to think of it as an historical constant, as a fact of nature. It then becomes an innate drive, an instinct that has to assert itself. Fortunately, we can see most of mankind living quite happily without it, a condition which certainly refutes that theory. However, for most theatre people this circumstance only incites a missionary disposition to export their cult to the "uncivilized."

At present we witness the officially sponsored worship of art as an autonomous commodity. Theatre history, accordingly, has fetishized its subject. We regard theatre historical documents--if not independent from the original, contemporary social conditions--as definitely independent of the present social conditions. How, by this procedure, we can ever hope to say something

that relates to the present, is beyond my imagination. Let us remember that theatre history as an academically institutionalized subject did not develop out of a vacuum. The subject, i.e. the problems we choose and the findings at which we arrive, reflect certain needs that are able to assert themselves in our society. The particular knowledge we desire is related to this society, its distribution of manual and intellectual labor, its means and system of production. Therefore let us be human enough to act not only as historians, but also as responsible members of society; and not only after business hours.

We cannot meet this challenge by continuing with the traditional study of theatre history. Rather, we have to work towards a dialectic symbiosis between historically oriented sociological research and behaviorally oriented empirical research in theatre as communication.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Juergen Habermas, "Analytische Wissenschaftstheorie und Dialektik," in Theodor W. Adorno et al., Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie, 2nd ed. (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1969), p. 184. This source contains many references to publications by Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Juergen Habermas, Karl R. Popper, Ralf Dahrendorf, Hans Albert, etc., that can serve as a multifaceted introduction to the epistemological problems as discussed in this paper.

[2] On contemporary aspects of this metaphor see Konrad Zobel, "Dramaturgie der Resignation: Die Welt als Theater," Wort und Wahrheit, XXVII, 6 (1972), 512-518; Juergen Hofmann, "Geschichte als Theater," Neues Forum, 208 (Maerz/April 1971), 52-54; Juergen Hofmann, "Verdacht auf Theater," in Juergen Hofmann and Klaus Pierwoss, ed., Wiener Theateroktober (Vienna: Kulturverein, 1970), pp. 5-10.

[3] Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1951), I, 339.

[4] Habermas, p. 185.

[5] Karl R. Popper, The Poverty of Historicism (New York: Basic Books, 1960), p. 152.

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

6 The idealistic position has been sufficiently discredited to warrant criticism at this point. The idealistic historian, even more than the positivistic historian who--at least since Wittgenstein--arrives at a consequent relativity, is fatally entangled in the notion of objectivity when he dogmatically takes his values to be of absolute, "eternal" validity; he does not even realize the danger of subjectivity. The dialectic historian, while accepting relativity in terms of history as a whole (which is an unknown quality), is attempting to discern the absolute requirements of any given historical moment. His method derives from this paradoxical situation.